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CHARLES WAGLEY

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TAPIRAPÉ SOCIAL AND CULTURE CHANGE 1940-1953

by

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The Tapirapé are a Tupi-speaking tribe whose aboriginal habitat lay between the Araguaya and Xingu rivers in central Brazil. Tapirapé society and culture, as it existed before 1940, has been described by Herbert Baldus and the present author in a series of articles and monographs.[1] In 1940, when I left the Tapirapé village after approximately eighteen months of residence and research, I was convinced that Tapirapé society was rapidly disintegrating and that it would soon cease to exist as a distinct organized unit. At that time, although Tapirapé culture was essentially unchanged from its aboriginal condition, severe depopulation had so disrupted the social structure that the society seemed no longer to satisfy the minimal conditions for group survival.[2] A mere 147 individuals grouped in but one village were all that remained in 1940 of this tribe that once had numbered at least one thousand people living in five large villages. In 1953, when I returned for a short visit of three weeks with the Tapirapé Indians in their new village at the mouth of the Tapirapé River on the Araguaya, I found but 51 individuals. The rapid process of depopulation

1. Cf. Herbert Baldus, *Ensaios de Etnologia Brasileira*, São Paulo, 1937, and "Os Tapirapé, tribo Tupi no Brasil Central," *Revista do Arquivo Municipal*, Vols. XCVI-CV, CVII-CXXVII, São Paulo, 1944-49; and Charles Wagley, "Tapirapé Shamanism," *Boletim do Museu Nacional, Antropologia*, N.° 3, Rio, 1943.

2. Charles Wagley, "The Effects of Depopulation upon Social Organization as Illustrated by the Tapirapé Indians," *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Series II, Vol. 3, N.° 1, pp. 12-16, New York, 1940.

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had continued during the last thirteen years. Yet I found that even with so small a population Tapirapé society still functioned as an organised unit and Tapirapé culture persisted, although highly modified by the events of the last thirteen years. Several points of theoretical importance can be learned from recent Tapirapé history and from some observations on social and cultural changes since 1940.

The sketchy outline of Tapirapé history between 1940 and 1953, which I have been able to piece together with the help of the Indians themselves, of Sr. Valentim Gomes (the officer of the post of the Brazilian Indian Service which services the Tapirapé, and my companion during both visits to the tribe in 1939-40), and of a published report by Herbert Baldus,[2] indicates the tremendous shocks this society has suffered in the last decade. Briefly, this history is as follows: In 1941, just a year after my 1940 visit, a serious epidemic broke out in the Tapirapé village in which I had lived. As usual, following an epidemic during which there is a series of deaths, dissension broke out within the village. A well-known shaman was killed and a group of Tapirapé ("perhaps thirty in number") fled the village to the Brazilian town of Furo de Pedra, some two hundred kilometers from their village. It is reported that at least two people died during this trip and that the group returned to their village infected with common colds. By August of 1940, Sr. Gomes was able to ascertain that twenty-six people had died since June of the same year. In September of 1941 an Indian Post for the protection of the Tapirapé was opened, but it was established at the mouth of the Tapirapé River, near the Carajá whom the Tapirapé feared and near Brazilians from whom they contracted new infections. That year, a few Indians visited the Post but after the death of a young Tapirapé man at the Post and an unfortunate experience with a group of drunken Brazilian men, only rarely did a Tapirapé

2. "Tribos da Bacia do Araguaia e o Serviço de Proteção aos Indios", in *Revista do Museu Paulista*, N. S., Vol. II, São Paulo, 1948, pp. 137-168.

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Indian venture to visit the Post. For almost three years, their only contact with Brazilian culture was via the Dominican priests and an occasional hunter who visited them upriver in their own village or at one of the ports along the Tapirapé River which they were accustomed to approach. For a few years, the Tapirapé lived in relative peace.

In 1947, the year when Herbert Baldus again visited the Tapirapé, two events took place which were crucial in the further disorganization of their society. First, he encountered eight families of Brazilians at Porto Velho, half-way up the Tapirapé River, in an area which had always been traditional hunting and fishing territory of the Tapirapé. This was but the beginning of the steady occupation of the lands along the Tapirapé River by Brazilians; by 1953 it was estimated that 120 families were living along the river, and there were three cattle ranches at spots along the banks where the Indians often came to fish and hunt during the dry season. The vast and open *campos* along the Tapirapé River, which before 1940 simply teemed with game, now provided grazing lands for cattle. No longer was the contact of the Tapirapé with Brazilians sporadic and brief, but it had become continuous and frequent.

Secondly, it was in 1947 that the Tapirapé were attacked by the northern Kayapo as related by Baldus.[4] Four women were killed during the attack and two young women captured by the Kayapo, and the Tapirapé village was burned along with most of their belongings such as hammocks, utensils and tools. The entire Tapirapé group were driven by fear and hunger to the margins of the Tapirapé River where they depended upon a Brazilian rancher and the simple Brazilian frontiersmen for food. From 1947 until 1950, Tapirapé society as an organized unit might be said not to have existed; a group of families lived near a ranch on the Tapirapé River attempting to plant gardens in the narrow strip of forest along the river but they were mainly existing on what

[4] *Loc. cit.*, p. 142

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they might beg from the Brazilian. Another group of families came to live at the Indian post near the mouth of the Tapirapé River, where the Indian officer helped them build temporary shelters and provided them with food. And earlier, before the Kayapo attack, a small group of families had broken from the main village to migrate to a distant village site called Čičutawa, far to the north.[4] During these years, ceremonial and religious life, normal family life, aboriginal economic activities, and in fact most of the regular activities of their society were either completely suspended or affected by a marginal existence to the Brazilian frontiersmen.

But in 1950 Tapirapé society was, in a sense, reorganized. As a result of the efforts of the Indian officer, all of the remaining Tapirapé (except those who had migrated to the north) came together to form a village which they called *Tuwidho* (New Village), some six kilometers from the Post Heloísa Alberto Torres. By 1953 this village had been fully completed, and the Tapirapé had relatively large and productive gardens in the forest some three or four kilometers from it. The village had been constructed, as in aboriginal times, in a circle surrounding a large men's ceremonial house. The houses were in general of the aboriginal type, each housing several biological families. Ceremonials had begun again and, as before, the nights were filled with singing. Although considerably modified, normal Tapirapé social life was again possible. Although for a short period Tapirapé society might be said not to have existed, Tapirapé culture continued to live in the minds of these few remaining individuals and it allowed them, given the opportunity, to recreate, although in a much attenuated form, their social life. This is a striking example of the difference between a society and its culture.

But both Tapirapé society and Tapirapé culture had been considerably modified by the events of the last decade. There were striking differences in social

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 127-128. This group has never been heard of since they left. It is the opinion of the remaining Tapirapé that they were killed by the Kayapo since Čičutawa is near Kayapo territory.

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organization, in technology, in ceremonial and religious life, in economics and, in fact, in almost all realms of life. In the space of a short paper it will be possible to indicate only a few of these modifications. One of the most striking changes has to do with the relations of the Tapirapé with their traditional enemies, the Carajá. In 1940 the Tapirapé told of their fear of the Carajá who had attacked them several times in the past, and Tapirapé men traveling along the Araguaya River with the writer hid in the bottom of the boat in fear of their traditional foe. No Tapirapé would have dared enter a Carajá village without the protection of a Brazilian. But in 1953 the new Tapirapé village was situated within six or seven kilometers of a Carajá village. Two Tapirapé youths, for lack of Tapirapé women of marriageable age, had married Carajá girls, and following the rule of matrilocal residence which both Carajá and Tapirapé cultures share they lived in the Carajá village and worked with their in-laws. Each day during my 1953 visit there were Carajá visitors in the Tapirapé village. They came to exchange fish, game or other items for Tapirapé manioc — for the Tapirapé are by tradition better gardeners than the Carajá. A friendly Carajá even joined the Tapirapé men to dance and sing during one of their ceremonials, and one evening a group of Tapirapé accepted the invitation of the Carajá to attend their wrestling matches on the beach in front of the Carajá village. One must conclude that old and traditional enmities and antagonisms between peoples can fade out easily and quickly unless there are deep-seated economic or territorial bases for such antagonisms.

Another striking change between the Tapirapé in 1940 and those of 1953 was their recent adaptation to canoe travel. In 1940, the Tapirapé might have been classified as "foot Indians". They neither made nor owned canoes. Many Tapirapé were unable to swim. They were all most inept when forced to travel by canoe. In 1953, six Tapirapé men owned canoes they had acquired from the Carajá, some had to make canoes, and

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several had become excellent canoe-men. Small Tapirapé boys spent a large part of the day, as do Carajá boys, swimming in the nearby river. Thus, within about a decade, the Tapirapé had shifted from "foot Indians" (one of the criteria for Marginal Cultures, according to the *Handbook of South American Indians*[4]) to "canoe Indians" (a criterion for Tropical Forest Cultures according to the same source). Such criteria as the mode of transportation obviously have little historical depth and are thus of little value for classificatory purposes.

In 1940, the most important individuals in Tapirapé society were the shamans or *pančes*; the tribe depended upon them for protection against dangerous supernaturals, cures for illness, and even bringing the spirits of children so that women would conceive. But in 1953 not one individual in the Tapirapé village would admit that he was a *pančе*. Opronunxui and Antonio Pereira, two Tapirapé men between 30 and 40 years of age, were said to be able to "cure" a little, but they had none of the formidable powers of the old *pančes*. "The *pančes* have ended," said the Tapirapé. As a result, they are today more vulnerable to the dangerous supernaturals, but they are also free from the deadly effects of sorcery which they believed the old shamans practiced and had caused their rapid population decline. In fact, the suspicion of shamans and the relatively frequent execution of those suspected of sorcery made shamanism such a dangerous occupation that no one wishes to take up that once honored profession. But without shamans Tapirapé religion has lost its central figures, and much of the old religious knowledge will be lost to Tapirapé culture. Without the full knowledge of their own religion, the Tapirapé are today more vulnerable to the teachings of missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic, who are now active among them.

With so few members, Tapirapé culture is "passing through a narrow funnel" so to speak; in other words,

[4] Bulletin 143, Bureau of American Ethnology, vol. I, 1946; also see Ibid., vol. 5, pp. 673, 1949.

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with so few people holding the status positions of aboriginal Tapirapé society much specialized knowledge will be lost. This is true of shamanism, as explained above, and it is true of the weaving of baskets for which Tapirapé men were justly famous before 1940. In 1953, only two men of the tribe knew the art of basket making. In aboriginal times, it was a technique which men learned after adolescence (Tapirapé boys were not expected to learn the manly arts), and with the death of so many older men and the disintegration of Tapirapé society, few young men were able to study. Both of the young men who did learn produced baskets which in 1940 would have been considered distinctly inferior and few of the young men in 1953 showed an inclination to learn the art. Like many other aspects of the culture, Tapirapé basketry will probably be a "lost art" within a generation.

Before 1940, one of the striking aspects of Tapirapé culture recorded by both Baldus and myself was the complex set of rules governing food taboos. According to aboriginal Tapirapé culture, women and children are forbidden to eat venison as well as many other specific meats. Nowadays the Tapirapé frequently have beef, which they receive by trade from the Brazilian around the Indian post. As might be suspected, beef is equated with venison and it is taboo to Tapirapé women. Likewise, Tapirapé men who are the fathers of small children may eat neither venison nor beef. One Tapirapé male explained that "Even when we were hungry our women would not eat beef." But in view of their experience with other cultures (i. e., Carajá and Brazilian), such taboos are growing weaker. Hidden from their husbands, several Tapirapé women tested beef for the first time when offered it by the wife of the Indian officer, and several females have taken to eating it (and even venison) at the Indian Post pleading that their secret be kept from their husbands. And one Tapirapé male, the father of an infant, argued while eating venison that the taboo was not a logical one. Food taboos are still kept but

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the possibility of comparison, of observing other forms of behavior which were formerly closed to them, now stimulates change in Tapirapé culture.

Numerous other modifications in the Tapirapé way of life might be reported. In 1953, a few Tapirapé collected money which they kept as they formerly kept red parrot feathers in a bamboo container, but they have only vague ideas of its value. Two men own rifles but they have little idea of how to keep them in order. Men wear trousers when they visit the Indian Post, but they might at any time calmly remove them in the presence of the missionaries, and women have learned quickly to put on a wrap-around skirt when Brazilian men approach. These and a series of other changes might be quickly noted as having occurred between 1940 and 1953.

Still, Tapirapé culture has remained remarkably stable in face of the violent disruption of Tapirapé society during this last decade. Tapirapé culture has been modified by borrowing and by loss of trait and pattern due to the reduction of population and the disorganization of the society. Tapirapé society, with fewer people and new influences, has now changed more than Tapirapé culture. Certainly society and culture are intimately related phenomena but the history of the Tapirapé during the last thirteen years indicates the value of distinguishing between social change on the one hand and culture change on the other. For a period the Tapirapé lived as members of a distinct society, but their culture persisted, and with this knowledge they have been able to recreate, at least temporarily, their organized social unit.